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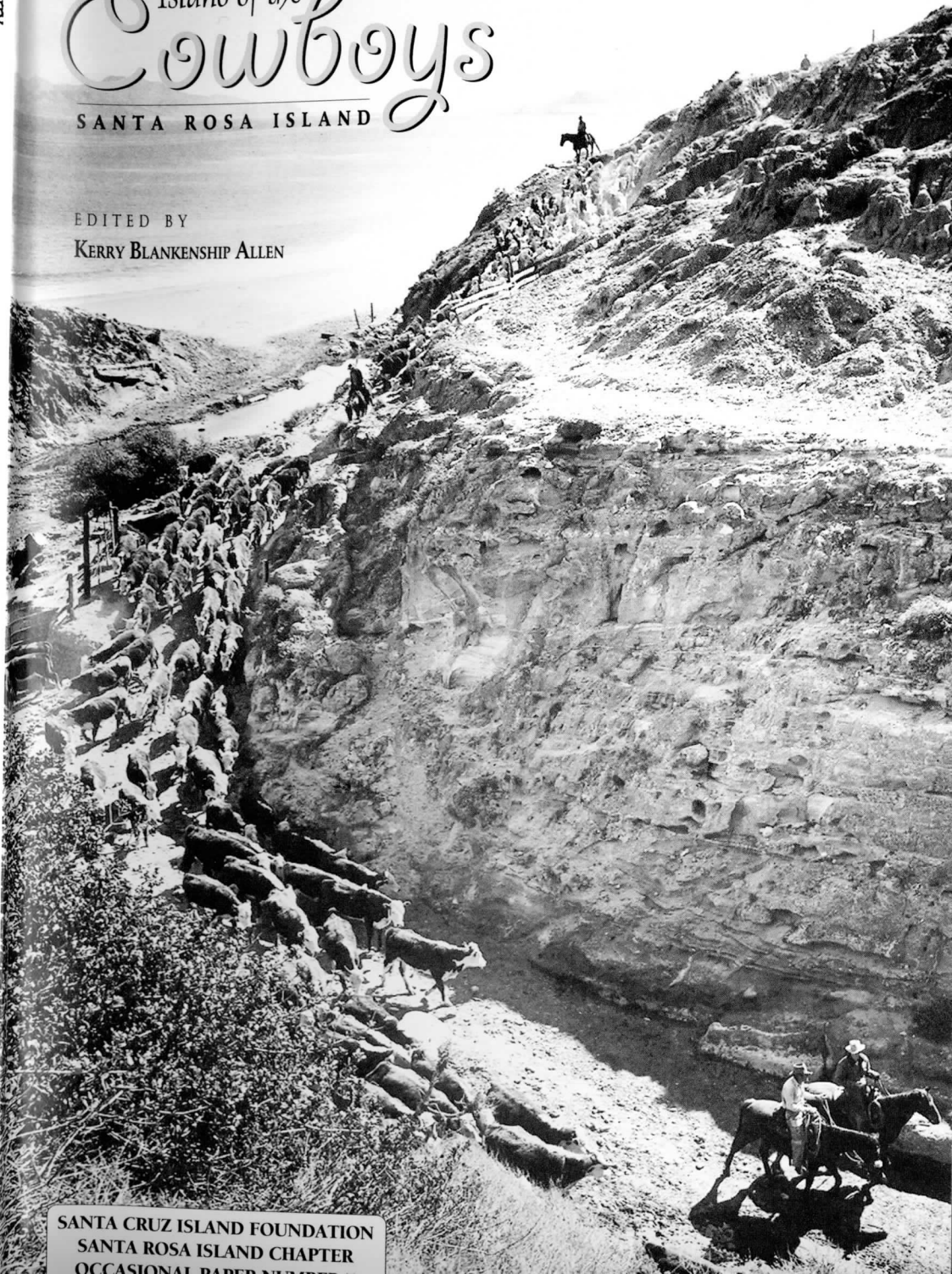
ISLAND OF THE COWBOYS



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Island of the
Cowboys
SANTA ROSA ISLAND

EDITED BY
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SANTA CRUZ ISLAND FOUNDATION
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Alexander P. More who, in 1884, shot and killed Ah You, a Chinese laborer who lived and worked on Santa Rosa Island. Photo c. 1880.

(Santa Barbara Historical Museums)

THE MURDER OF AH YOU

by Kerry Blankenship Allen



It was in the summer of 1884, during which time Alexander P. (A.P.) More was the sole owner of Santa Rosa Island, that Ah You, a Chinese laborer working on Santa Rosa Island, was shot and killed by More. At the time, More was as well known for his arrogant and non-compromising character as he was for his island empire. But still it came as a surprise when the news of the shooting and subsequent death of You reached the mainland. The events of the murder and inquisition were well documented not only by the court, but also by the press, although one account reads as sensationally as the other. During the More tenure of island ownership (1859-1901), the island was managed by A.P. and two of his brothers, T. Wallace More and Henry H. More. A.P., however, was the only More to act the island's sole owner by acquiring all the island shares. During his time as island owner, 1865 until his death in 1893, and then via his estate until 1901, Santa Rosa Island was a sheep ranch. The events which preceded the incident, the murder and the inquisition have been summarized here. The original court document is housed at Santa Barbara County Superior Court.

On Sunday, July 7, 1884, the schooner *Santa Rosa Island* was docked at the wharf in Bechers Bay on Santa Rosa Island. The wharf, located within easy walking distance from the island's ranch complex, was busy with sheep shearers preparing to return home, ranch hands gathering livestock to sell at mainland markets, and laborers off-loading supplies.

A.P. More, the island's owner, was busy tending to ranch matters before embarking on the schooner for the long trip home. At the tender age of 20, Ah You, a Chinese immigrant, not only found himself working as a day laborer on a remote and desolate island, but also as a disgruntled employee.

Records indicate that You first went to Santa Rosa Island to work in April 1883, although it is unclear as to his exact job duties. One witness testified that You was employed to perform "general work." However, the *Santa Barbara Daily Press* reported that You was employed as "an island cook."¹

At any rate, on several occasions prior to his murder, You had expressed to the other ranch hands a desire not only to leave the island, but also to kill More before he took his final departure.

It was the day the schooner arrived that You decided he had finally had enough of island life. He packed his bag, loaded his bed roll, and prepared to make his way back home via the schooner. Although the plan must have seemed reasonable to You, he forgot one important detail, receiving permission from More to leave the island—a mistake which ultimately led to his demise.

You was on the wharf—attempting to hide—when More approached the landing, handing out last-minute instructions to his ranch hands. Upon stepping on to the wharf, More noticed You standing near the schooner, his belongings in hand, ready to leave the island. Knowing You was not scheduled to depart the island, and in fact had work to complete, More began to question the delinquent employee.

As More recollected: “Then I came to the steps of the boat. I inquired to the captain and seamen about the Chinaman’s things being on board. I ordered them brought ashore. The next I saw of the Chinaman was within about six or seven feet on the same side of the wharf near the entrance to the step, standing in about the same position—in a surly way.”²

Finding that You had plans to leave the island, More ordered him back to the ranch complex. You, determined and now desperate to reach the mainland, lunged toward More. His hand, once concealed, opened, revealing a small knife. More, trying to protect himself, or maybe in an act of haste, stepped back and shot You—the bullet hit You in the head.

You fell face down on to the wharf. Blood trickled from the wound. More ordered Philip Curran, a seaman, to take the knife from You. As Curran recalled during the inquisition:

“Am a seaman employed on schooner *Santa Rosa Island*; knew Ah You; was on the island week ago Sunday; saw More and the Chinaman there took Thompson (Ira A.) aboard the schooner who was ordered by More to bring the Chinaman’s things from schooner. The fence prevented me from seeing clearly what was going on. Chinaman spoke two or three words and advanced on More, who retreated seven or eight feet, and then fired.



Santa Rosa Island’s wharf where the 1884 shooting of Ah You occurred. The wharf extended at least 30 feet seaward beyond the line of the low water marker and legal jurisdiction was never agreed upon. Photo 1995.
(Wm. B. Dewey)



Following the shooting, You was brought to his home in Santa Barbara’s Chinatown, where he later died. Photo c. 1900.
(Santa Barbara Historical Museums)

I did not interfere because it was none of my business. I thought from their movements one or the other would be killed. The Chinaman had the knife in his left hand when I turned him over. More told me to take the knife away from him. The Chinaman refused to give it up. I put my foot on Chinaman's hand and tried to take away the knife; could not do so, he held it too tight. Ah You did not speak a word while I was trying to take away knife. The Chinaman then tried to stick me in the foot with the knife. 'Me killee you,' he said to me. Ah Ming [the island cook] talked to Ah You and took the knife away from him; he had been in the habit of carrying another knife did not know of any use he had to carry such a knife. I asked Ah Ming what Ah You said to him while he was talking to him. Ah Ming said that Ah You said that if More had not killed him, he would have killed More."³

The initial shot apparently did not kill You. After being quickly examined by Samuel Burtis, captain of *Santa Rosa Island*, You was loaded aboard the schooner to, as he had wished, go home. When the schooner arrived in Santa Barbara, You was carried to Chinatown. By the next morning he was dead.

The following day, Doctor H. N. Bradshaw testified that he had seen the body of You prior to his death, and "inserted his finger, finding the bullet had entered the brain," and "also found a slight bruise on the side of You's head." Though the doctor's detailed account of the injury conjures sympathy for You, Bradshaw, a longtime friend of More, would not testify that You's death was a direct result of the gun shot wound.

Doctor S. B. Knox, however, believed—and testified to the fact—that You had indeed "died from the effects of the wound," while a third doctor, Doctor Winchester, testified that "the gun shot wound was sufficient to cause death, without any other cause."⁴

Despite much compelling testimony, the case was ultimately dismissed. The shooting took place on the wharf—over water—and therefore jurisdiction could never be proved. As the court recorder wrote: "The evidence taken shows that the difficulty between the defendant and the deceased took place on the wharf which extends from the shore on Santa Rosa Island into the Pacific and that the fatal shot was fired and the deceased received the mortal wound at a point on the wharf about 30 feet seaward beyond the line of low water marker."⁵

Case dismissed.

NOTES

¹*Santa Barbara Daily Press*, July 7, 1884.

²The People of the State of California vs. A.P. More, July 10 1884, Santa Barbara County Superior Court Records Office.

³*Santa Barbara Daily Press*, July 9, 1884.

⁴The People of the State of California vs. A.P. More, July 10 1884, Santa Barbara County Superior Court Records Office.

⁵*Santa Barbara Daily Press*, July 9, 1884.